



Feeling good, being good and looking good: Motivations for, and benefits from, project management certification

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Abstract

Project management (PM) is one of many occupations following a path to professionalization that includes voluntary certification. It has been said that certification, and especially voluntary certification, can be seen as an approach to *being good* by improving our competence in the profession, or a means to *looking good*, essentially signaling the capabilities of the holder. Based on self-determination theory, we contribute to this discussion the notion of *feeling good* whereby certification provides a way to challenge one's capabilities, provide self-actualization, and a sense of worth. Using two sets of survey responses, collected 10 years apart (2004 and 2014), we assess whether there are differences in the demographics of those seeking voluntary project management certification, and the motivations (expected benefits), and realized benefits associated with this certification, at these two points in time. Demographically, the people with certification and those not pursuing certification did not exhibit any significant differences in either time period. Analyses indicate that feeling good and being good are the main motivators but participants pursuing certification in 2014 reported lower levels of motivations and received more benefit than those in 2004. Comparing responses as to why professionals pursue voluntary PM certification across a decade span, gives us an indication of how these perceptions may be changing with the increased popularity of the certification. We compare these findings to similar studies examining other volunteer certifications and conclude by discussing the potential impact of these changes from the perspective of the individuals seeking certification, the occupation, and certifying organizations.

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1. Introduction

Voluntary certification has been a growing phenomenon in a number of fields that has only recently given rise to interest with respect to its impact on our understanding of professions and career development. Voluntary certification is now well established in such fields as purchasing and logistics, IT Management, human resource management, and project management (PM). In 2006, Hansen estimated that there were over 1600 voluntary certifications offered in the United States

alone. In contrast to more established professions (e.g. law, accounting, teaching), where one is not allowed to practice unless one is certified (licensed), these varied professionals make a decision to pursue certification after assessing the perceived costs and benefits associated with the decision (Lipner et al., 2006). However, there are few studies which systematically investigate the internal and external stimuli for voluntary certification (see for example, Byrne et al., 2004; Lester and Dwyer, 2012) and empirical research on the value of voluntary certification is equally rare (Aguinis and Lengnick-Hall, 2012). Likewise, there are very few studies examining the realization of expected benefits from such voluntary certification (Fertig et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2006a).

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This study addresses this gap in our understanding of the growth of voluntary certification. Using two samples of certified project managers, we examine the motivation for, and benefits received from, PM certification. We conducted surveys in 2004, and again, in 2014, collecting information on why people sought out certification and what they thought they gained from the process. Looking at the two sets of data, at two points in time, allows us to observe changes in motivations and benefits over a decade which witnessed unprecedented growth in this particular certification, and in voluntary certification in general. Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), and empirical studies from a variety of emerging professions (such as nursing, accounting, human resources, and communications), we interpret these changes to provide insights into the future of PM certification. These insights are important to PM practitioners, organizations employing project managers, and the professional associations that have established themselves as the global sources of PM knowledge as well as other occupations following the voluntary certification path.

2. What is voluntary certification and why is it important

Certification can be defined as “any type of recognized third-party assessment: professional certification, certification by occupational associations or union apprenticeship programs, proprietary certification, voluntary certifications provided by independent bodies, and certificates from reputable skill training agencies” (Fertig et al., 2009). Voluntary certification is different from occupational licensing (Wiley, 1995), as the latter is mandatory and required by law to practice a particular occupation such as law, accounting or medicine. Voluntary certification of employee competencies is a rapidly growing and widespread occupational practice in most western labor markets (Hordern, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2016). This type of certification is growing at an accelerated rate (Higgins and Hallström, 2007; Carter, 2005) in the 21st century.

Certification is often presented as a way to attest to worker competency, foster employee development, and ultimately improve work performance (Richardson, 2016; Kleiner, 2006; Phillips, 2004). In many ways, it is often presented as an uncontroversial good for both employees and organizations (Shackman, 2015; Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis, 2012). Certification is often considered a step on the road to professionalization of any occupation. According to the Trait Theory of professions (Wilensky, 1964), the professionalization of an occupation normally entails the development of certain traits including development of a body of knowledge, distinguished skills, documented training, controlled entry (through certification and or licensing), and ethical rules of behavior (Higgins and Hallström, 2007). However, recent research (Albert, 2017; Haskins et al., 2011; de los Rios et al., 2010; Varma et al., 2006) has also identified a set of alternative reasons for pursuing certification, including sometimes as a symbol to use in impression management, to acquire legitimacy, and to improve reputational capital without actually changing practices or performance.

2.1. Voluntary certification in PM

Voluntary certification in PM has expanded rapidly in the last 30 years (Pinto and Winch, 2016). In 1984, PMI introduced the world’s first certification program for project managers. Other project management professional associations quickly joined the certification effort. IPMA introduced its certification in the early 2000s (Foti, 2001). These PM professional associations positioned certification as a credential that sets the project management professional apart from other non-certified applicants in terms of project management competences and as a first step on the road to professionalization (Blomquist and Söderholm, 2002). PM associations for many years followed a stated goal of professionalization. Project managers have been encouraged to adopt professional attitudes towards project management to facilitate the creation of a project management profession (Blomquist and Thomas, 2008; Hodgson and Paton, 2016; Pollack and Algeo, 2015; Zwerman and Thomas, 2001; Zwerman et al., 2004). In fact, until 2004, the tag line of the Project Management Institute (PMI) was *building the profession*.

Many PM professionals have embraced certification as evidenced in Fig. 1. Clearly, the perceived benefits of certification have captured the interest and attention of many practitioners who have chosen to invest in certification.

This growth suggests that many project managers perceive attaining PM certification as a beneficial move. Today, PM certification is voluntary (although there are moves towards making it a regulated profession in the UK¹ and possibly other jurisdictions) rather than required to practice.

In the PM world, certification is taken to “denote mastery of these [PM] skills, experiences, and knowledge” (Starkweather and Stevenson, 2011) and “is an important tool for maintaining and developing competencies for project requirements” (Loufrani-Fedida and Saglietto, 2016). Despite PMI’s continued assertion, consistent with the licensure versus certification distinction, that certification only provides evidence that an individual has met a specified minimum standard to practice, both academics and practitioners continue to assert that certification denotes a mark of endorsement that the individual is fit to practice (Ramazani and Jergeas, 2015). Even more, the underlying message is that this individual is MORE fit to practice than someone who is not certified. This conflation of certification with competence continues even in PMI’s web advertising circa Feb 2017 where they lead with the claim that certification equates with expertise as in the following headline “We serve practitioners and organizations with standards that describe good practices, globally recognized credentials that certify project management expertise and resources for professional development, networking and community”. Despite these assertions and beliefs, the claim of professionalization of the PM occupation through certification needs to be supported empirically. Furthermore, studying perceived motivations for, and realized benefits of, certification, from the eyes

¹ See Association of Project Management Announcement here: <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/apm-receives-its-royal-charter>

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